

Hiawatha / Hereafter: Re-appropriating Longfellow's Epic in Northern Ontario

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Abstract: This article focuses on appropriation and re-appropriation in selected uses of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* in Northern Ontario from the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, using a framework drawn from Indigenous theory on colonialism and decolonization and research on the cultural politics of race and nature. Issues of colonial resource extraction and appropriation have marked the text from its inception, as *Hiawatha* was based mostly on Anishinaabe narratives that were collected by Indian Agent and "ethnographer" Henry Rowe Schoolcraft in the process of his work towards the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the Great Lakes region in the nineteenth century. In the years since its publication, *Hiawatha* has been a hugely influential piece of literature, north as well as south of the border. As I show, the text has signified in very different ways for settler and Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario. In the early twentieth century, Canadian Pacific Railway Colonization Officer L.O. Armstrong used the text to attract settlers and tourists to the forests of Northern Ontario through promotional pamphlets and outdoor performances of the work; to the Indigenous communities involved in the performances, however, the play held very different meanings. Today, versions of Longfellow's text form the subject of historical and cultural transmission projects in Batchewana and Garden River First Nations. Poet Liz Howard has also worked with Longfellow's text in producing a critique of settler resource extraction and colonial assimilation in the context of Northern Ontario. In tracing these very different uses of *Hiawatha*, this article builds on the work of Indigenous writers and scholars who explore colonialism as an ongoing process characterized by interconnected forms of theft and theorize methods of

literary and cultural analysis to halt and reverse such processes in the context of work towards decolonization. I also draw on studies of the cultural politics of race and nature, which demonstrate how settler ideas about race and indigenosity have long been central to the construction of iconic Canadian wilderness spaces.

Keywords: Hiawatha, Canadian literature, cultural appropriation, colonialism, decolonization

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* (1855), which was hailed as "a prediction in verse of the conquest of America by the white race," built upon the unreliable "ethnographic" work of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, an Indian Agent "notorious for having orchestrated the dispossession of [Odawa and Ojibway] lands" (McNally 105, 110). At the conclusion of Longfellow's poem, its chimerical hero Hiawatha (based very loosely on the Anishinaabe cultural hero Nanabozho but named after a historical figure of great significance to the Haudenosaunee)¹ cheerfully enjoins his people to welcome the Palefaces as he briskly departs in his canoe for the land of the Hereafter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Longfellow's use of Indigenous narratives in writing his "Indian epic" has long been celebrated by settlers north and south of the border. While the poem is generally considered in the context of canonical American literature, this article focuses on three particular appropriations and re-appropriations of *Hiawatha* in Northern Ontario, Canada. Just as the border between Canada and the United States cuts through Anishinaabe territory (as well as through the territory of other nations implicated in Longfellow's epic, including the Haudenosaunee), the "original" text reflects the input of a number of Indigenous and settler sources, writers, translators, and storytellers who frequently moved back and forth across the border, and across whose lives the border also moved.

While the poem was published in 1855, this article begins in the first years of the twentieth century with the Canadian Pacific Railway's use of *Hiawatha* in attracting white settlers and tourists to the forests and lakes of Northern Ontario, branded as "the Land of Hiawatha." This instance

of appropriation reflects the complex interconnections between the theft of land and culture in settler colonialism; it also exemplifies the significance of race and ideas about “Indians” in the construction of iconic Canadian wilderness spaces. The Indigenous communities who worked with the C.P.R.’s Colonization Officer in performing a translated version of *Hiawatha* engaged with the text in very different ways, however, turning the project to the benefit of the community as an opportunity for public engagement, cultural transmission, and a source of income (McNally, Francis). Today, the text and history of these performances has become a cultural and historical resource for the Batchewana and Garden River First Nations. The article concludes with a study of poet Liz Howard’s anti-colonial “unwriting” of *Hiawatha*, which critiques colonial forms of assimilation, including resource extraction, residential schools, and cultural appropriation, in the context of Northern Ontario “wilderness.”

Rather than deploying the tools of post-colonial literary analysis, this article draws on recent work in Indigenous theory on colonialism and decolonization and on research on the cultural politics of race and nature. Specifically, my discussion of cultural appropriation and re-appropriation seeks to respond to Indigenous writers’ and scholars’ analyses of colonialism as characterized by the interconnected processes of land and cultural theft, as well as to theoretical and methodological frameworks designed to promote decolonial scholarship, as in the work of Indigenous literary nationalists.

Indigenous writers and theorists have emphasized the importance of understanding ongoing colonialism in terms of interconnected material and symbolic processes (Alfred, “Restitution” 181), including the linked practices of cultural appropriation, resource extraction, and land theft (Keeshig-Tobias, *Contemporary Challenges* 82). As Taiaiake Alfred says, colonialism is “the fundamental injustice of being forcibly removed from the land [and/]or being denied access to the land to continue traditional cultural activities”; forms of cultural disruption work to “compound[d] the effects of dispossession” (“Colonialism” 42). In this context, cultural appropriation is understood as part and parcel of the ostensibly more material practices of colonialism such as dispossession and resource

extraction. Mishuana Goeman uses the term “colonial spatializing” to describe how Indigenous peoples’ “lands, bodies and minds” have been targeted through “maps, travel logs, engravings, newspapers, almanacs, and many other forms of colonial writings” that “for[m] a systemic practice of confining Native spaces from land to bodies”; “nationalist discourses . . . territorialize the . . . landscape by manufacturing categories and separating land from people” (295).

As Audra Simpson puts it, “representation does the work of expropriation,” and “narrative work . . . put[s] into action the possibilities of Indigenous disenfranchisement, from land . . . and from each other” (115). Lenore Keeshig-Tobias emphasizes the connection between settlers’ obsession with “stealing native stories” and land theft (“Stop Stealing”). As she explains, imitating the settler’s acquisitive glee:

It’s like this vast wonderful Canada we have! White Canadians look at it, and they say, “Oh, this is an unused national resource! Let’s go and cut down the trees! Let’s go and mine! Let’s bring out the uranium! Let’s take out the nickel, and whatever! No one is using it. Look at this wild rice here: it’s an unused natural resource, we’ll have our commercial harvesters come in!” They never think! They never think that this is someone’s home! . . . They have our land, and now they want our stories, our voices, too.” (*Contemporary Challenges* 82)

Hartmut Lutz, whose work draws on critiques of cultural appropriation developed by Indigenous writers including Keeshig-Tobias, Lee Maracle, Marie Annharte Baker and others, summarizes the issue of cultural appropriation in the context of Canadian colonialism in this way: what is at stake is not “[v]arious forms of cultural exchange . . . [that] continue to happen wherever different cultures meet and rub off on each other” but rather

the kind of appropriation which happens within a colonial structure, where one culture is dominant politically and economically over . . . other[s], and rules and exploits [them]. . . . [I]t is the kind of appropriation in which aspects of the col-

onized culture are appropriated by the dominant one, while at the same time all traces of origin are neglected and displaced. . . . [It is] selective, [it] disowns origin or authorship, [and it is] ahistorical in that it excludes from its discourse the historical context. (168)

Lutz's definition, like Keeshig-Tobias', emphasizes the connection between the cultural and the material; the very concept of "cultural appropriation" refers to the existence of deeply unequal political and economic relations.

In this context, scholars and writers including Indigenous literary nationalists² have emphasized the decolonizing potential of Indigenous literatures and the need for literary criticism that focuses on, strengthens, and increases knowledge of the national and/or cultural contexts in which Indigenous literature is produced. It has been argued, for instance, that a shift to the historical and contextual study of particular Indigenous literary texts does more to illuminate "the contributions and potential of Indigenous worldviews" (Reder ix) than approaches, like many of those associated with post-colonial literary and cultural studies, that are arguably better suited to highlighting commonalities across colonial contexts. In her work, for example, Deanna Reder has "prioritize[d] Cree intellectual and cultural perspectives" in developing new readings of texts with reference to "*wâhkotowin*, the Cree value of kinship or interrelatedness, [and] *kisteanemétowin*, respect between people" (ii).

Such an approach differs significantly from analyses that highlight hybridity and transcultural exchange. While such approaches have been very popular for the way they enable a focus on the inherent instability of cultural formations, the radical ambivalence of language and meaning, and the ways in which relations of colonizer/colonized are mutually constructed (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 97), scholars who associate their work with an explicit politics of *decolonization* often express concerns that hybridity and other concepts associated with post-colonial literary and cultural analysis may not lend themselves particularly well to a focus on "the imbalance and inequality of the power relations" of

colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 97). Over the past two decades, a number of noted Indigenous writers and literary scholars including Kimberly Blaeser, Armand Garnet Ruffo, and Thomas King have expressed concerns regarding the predominance of post-colonial literary analysis. The concept of hybridity has come under particular critique and/or has often been deliberately set aside (Reder 12, 36, 139) by scholars who choose to examine Indigenous literature in its cultural and/or national context and to highlight “cultural and textual specificity” (Ruffo 93). While not all scholars are equally well-placed to produce analyses that explore how a given piece of Indigenous literature reflects or engages with a particular national context or intellectual or cultural tradition, these debates nonetheless have implications for non-Indigenous scholars in terms of the frameworks they choose to apply to various texts and the ways in which they respond (or fail to respond) to the critiques that have been leveled against popular modes of contemporary research. It is for this reason that I bracket concepts such as hybridity in an attempt to focus on cultural appropriation in light of the material relations of colonialism, to foreground the links between different forms of colonial appropriation and resource extraction, and to highlight contemporary anti- and decolonial uses of Longfellow’s text.

My discussion also builds on research on the cultural politics of race and nature that explores the significance of constructions of wilderness to Canada as a white settler society; as scholars working in this field have shown, “[t]he Great White North” is a particularly “enduring Canadian myth,” a key image in the national imaginary that combines ideas of geography and race to “assert the dominance of whiteness as a cultural norm and to build a sense of national identity linked closely to nature and wilderness” (Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayashi 1). As Bonita Lawrence explains, “Canadian national identity is deeply rooted in the notion of Canada as a vast northern wilderness, the possession of which makes Canadians unique and ‘pure’ of character” (Lawrence 21). Such narratives work to naturalize the presence of white settlers in these landscapes by obscuring the historical and ongoing violence and illegality of settler colonialism: “whiteness suggests innocence,” and the innocence

of whiteness is a “quintessential feature of white settler mythologies” (Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayashi 1).

The notion of a vast, unspoiled Canadian wilderness is a historically contingent invention, “tenac[iously]” created by settlers as they “repea[t] the founding colonial fiction of terra nullius” (1) To settlers, wilderness³ refers to spaces—and resources—that are understood to be fundamentally *available* to them, for occupation, development, and resource extraction. The failure to recognize these lands as the territories of Indigenous peoples and as already implicated in complex systems of co-existence, governance, law, and culture, reflects the fact that, “in order for Canada to have a viable national identity, the histories [and presence] of Indigenous nations, in all their diversity and longevity, must be erased” (Lawrence 23). Likewise, “the historical record of how the land was acquired—the forcible and relentless dispossession of Indigenous peoples, the theft of their territories, and the implementation of legislation and policies designed to effect their total disappearance as peoples—must also be erased” (Lawrence 23–24).

While the physical removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands through legal and illegal means and the symbolic removal of Indigenous presence from the imagined geographies of the nation⁴ have long been crucial to settler race- and place-making and nation-building practices, a simultaneous and apparently paradoxical process has been observed: scholars have noticed that settlers have often attempted to “indigenize” themselves—to create “a natural affinity with the continent” (Deloria, *Playing Indian* 5) through the production and consumption of representations of Indigenous people, and through the invention and appropriation of Indigenous cultural formations. Settlers’ often intense attraction to Indigenous cultures seems to reflect a deep-rooted ambivalence, as this attraction coexists strangely with historical and ongoing violence and genocidal practices directed at Indigenous peoples.

Philip Deloria, for example, has identified the classic trope of the “noble savage” as representative of “[t]wo interlocked traditions” through which Americans have often critiqued their own social and political formations in comparison to those of “Indians” (who are believed to represent particularly desirable forms of human life), while simultaneously

embarking on brutal campaigns of “conquest” that depend on processes of dehumanization (Deloria, *Playing Indian* 4). “Positive” sentiments and representations seem to make settlers feel as if they have “become ‘native,’ [and] belong here” (Goldie 13); Rayna Green has described “playing Indian” as “[o]ne of the oldest and most pervasive forms of American cultural expression,” a performance that works to “root” settlers in “an American identity” (30). Yet Green insists that this tradition be understood as inextricably tied to the deaths and disappearances of actual Indigenous people(s) (49). Similar processes have also been discussed by Renato Rosaldo as “imperialist nostalgia” in which “agents of colonialism” “mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” or “regre[t] that things have not remained as they were prior to the [colonial] intervention” (69–70).

In considering the C.P.R.’s use of *Hiawatha* at the turn of the twentieth century, the following discussion seeks to highlight the significance of racialized constructions of wilderness in the creation of Canadian national identity and to reflect Indigenous theorists’ emphasis on how material and symbolic appropriations work together in colonialism. I am interested in the ways in which Armstrong’s promotional work for the C.P.R. draws on the figure of Hiawatha in attracting white settlers and tourists to “remote” regions in the process of “opening” them for settlement; Indigenous narratives, as filtered through Longfellow’s text, are packaged for the consumption of settlers in the process of making Canadian wilderness an attractive resource for the new nation. As scholars of race and nature have shown, the construction of Canadian wilderness as white space—space in which settlers are invited to perform and recuperate their whiteness—has often depended on ideas about and representations of “Indians” (Thorpe, “Temagami’s Tangled Wild” 206).

In order to offer context for this discussion, it may be helpful to briefly review the national significance of the C.P.R. during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Kevin Flynn explains, the history of the C.P.R. must be understood in terms of its textual as well as material contributions to the project of Canadian nationalism. In addition to meeting British Columbia’s requirements to join Confederation and providing a network for the movement of people, goods, and resources,

construction of the railway [also] allowed the nation to imagine its mastery over nature . . . travelling along its line brought this feeling of mastery down to a more tangible, personal level, affording passengers the opportunity to capture a country that had seemed such a short time ago resolutely resistant to being possessed. (Flynn 206–07)

Travel narratives, which were eagerly written and read during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often played a central role in disseminating this sense of “possession” through documenting railway trips across the country. As Flynn explains, “[b]y gaining familiarity with distant parts of the vast country, the reader could more fully imagine the national community to which he or she belonged” (207).

Here Flynn is referring to Benedict Anderson’s description of the nation as an imagined community—the collective imagining, which, as Anderson demonstrates, is so crucial to nationalism and has often been made possible by textual and literary representations that allow citizens to conceive of a sense of similarity and simultaneity amongst themselves. It is in part through shared reference to certain texts (certain tropes, certain genres) that a group of people comes to understand itself as a community, despite the fact that citizens of a nation may well have very little to do with one another. As Colonization Agent for the C.P.R., Armstrong worked to provide a similar sense of the possession of a vast geography to a community of white (“Anglo-Saxon”) tourists and settlers.

As part of his employment with the C.P.R., Armstrong wrote and published glowing descriptions of hunting and fishing trips, complete with railway timetables and “how to get there” instructions. Armstrong depicted the Canadian wilderness as populated with “Indians,” described, in turn, with reference to *Hiawatha*. It was in part the cachet of *Hiawatha* that worked to turn Canadian forests and lakes into an excitingly wild space for would-be settlers and tourists. Armstrong was also careful to illustrate the superiority of Canada’s pristine wilderness in contrast to the lamentably over-developed America:

[S]outh of the boundary line . . . lovers of the wild find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to gratify their tastes for

life in the woods and wilds and turn longing eyes to the north. Canada has room e[n]ough in her illimitable stretches of forest, with lakes, streams, and mountains, extending practically from ocean to ocean, for all who may come. . . . Canada can give space enough to make playgrounds for the world. (qtd. in Hodgins and Hobbs 191)

This text represents just the attitude parodied by Keeshig-Tobias—Canada has “room enough” for “all who may come”—“she” is simply chock-full of “attractions,” “space,” “playgrounds,” and “wild.” As Keeshig-Tobias would say, Armstrong clearly never thinks that he is talking about someone’s *home* as he offers up the resources of camping, hiking, hunting, and fishing to settlers and tourists.

In 1900, Armstrong published a pamphlet entitled *A Canoe Trip Through Temagaming the Peerless in the Land of Hiawatha*. Interestingly, apart from the description of the forests, lakes, and rivers as “the land of Hiawatha,” the pamphlet has nothing in particular to do with any Hiawathas, real or imaginary. The apparent lack of any need to go into detail about who Hiawatha was, why Temagami should be called “his land,” or why Hiawatha’s land should be any more attractive than anyone else’s suggests the ubiquity of Longfellow’s work north and south of the border. “Hiawatha” functions as a kind of racial shorthand, used to convey the “Indianness”—and thus the “wildness”—of Temagami; as Lockard observes, “[n]ineteenth century narratives relied broadly on the cultural shorthand of stereotypes that rendered vectors of race, class, and sex in immediately recognizable form” (113).

In Jocelyn Thorpe’s description of the ways in which “iconic sites of wild Canadian nature” like Temagami were constructed, at the turn of the twentieth century, as “wild space[s] existing only for [white men] to discover,” she explains that this experience of “discovery” depended in large part on assumptions about the Indigenous people who were often hired as guides on canoeing, camping, hunting, and fishing trips (Thorpe 206). Thorpe cites Armstrong’s constructions of the Ontario “wilderness” in a passage marked by the classic advertising technique of generating anxiety—in this case, nationalist, racialized, gender anxi-

ety—in order to encourage consumers to purchase a particular object: a C.P.R. ticket to the Canadian north. “Are we Anglo-Saxons degenerating?” he demands of his readers. “Is the . . . Canadian less hardy than his forefathers?” (qtd. in Thorpe 205). Naturally, the reader is meant to worry that the answer might be “yes”; just as “naturally,” Armstrong suggests, the cure for the white man’s creeping effeminacy is a journey into the land of Hiawatha, where the traveller is able to recuperate and reinvigorate his racial, gendered, national “superiority.”

Armstrong’s description of “Temagaming the Peerless,” one of the sites in which this recuperation might occur, makes frequent reference to “Indian” beliefs, legends, and names for particular geographical locations and attractions, including “Devil’s Island” and “Granny Island,” supposedly named for the Devil’s wife (Armstrong, *A Canoe Trip*). The pamphlet’s narrative presents a movement from the parts of the country that have already been settled—such as Temiskaming Station with its “surprisingly comfortable hotel,” or Haileybury with its “well-to-do settlement” populated by “highly-cultured people from England”—into the “wild” lakes and rivers, where the men were led by their “Indian guides,” who carried the canoes for the tourists “with apparently as much ease as we did our rifles and fishing rods” (Armstrong, *A Canoe Trip*). While these guides’ labour makes possible the treks into the wild, *Hiawatha* and other putatively “Indian” narratives are offered up as resources that, like the abundant local fish and game, not only make the trip exciting but also contribute to a rugged white Canadian masculinity.

While this pamphlet represents a relatively minimalist (though representative) reference to Hiawatha, Armstrong also undertook a much more involved project when, claiming for himself the supposedly Ojibway name “Waubungo,”⁵ he had *Hiawatha* translated into “Chippewa” and worked with a cast of Anishinaabe actors to present it on the shores of the lake at Desbarats, Ontario. According to Michael McNally, Armstrong “maintained that the pageant began not with him, but with George Kabaosa, an Anishinaabe man from the Garden River Reserve who had heard Armstrong recite portions of the poem around a campfire in 1893” (112). The libretto for the play was published

by the C.P.R. in 1901 (it includes the “original” and translated texts, *face-en-face*), along with “how to get there” information (Armstrong, *Hiawatha*). McNally explains:

At Desbarats, the stage itself was set on an island in the calm channels between lakes Superior and Huron. Performances began daily at 2:15, with audiences taking excursion trains from Sault Ste. Marie or staying overnight at either the Hiawatha Camp or Nokomis Lodge hotels on Kensington Point. Tourists did not just observe Indianness from the grandstand; they were invited to play Indian themselves by participating in the great feast of “bear meat and venison,” fishing with “Indian guides,” and engaging in canoe races and portage contests. (116)

In order to further publicize the project, Longfellow’s daughters were invited to a performance and took part in a ceremony in which they “bec[a]me honorary tribal members” (Lockard 120). After this first show in Desbarats, Ontario, the play was “picked up by” the residents of the Garden River reservation “adjoining Sault Ste Marie, who continued to perform it . . . for decades thereafter” (Lockard 120–21). While the play may have been successful for Armstrong’s purposes, it was significant in various different ways for the communities involved in the performances:

If [the actors] were playing Indian, they were Anishinaabeg playing Indian, and doing so for Anishinaabe reasons. In significant, if subtle, assertions of indigenous language, song, drum, and humor, Native people claimed the stage at least in part as a space of their own shaping, a place of conspicuous Native presence rather than absence. (McNally 107)

Especially in a context in which many Indigenous traditions were being outlawed, “stage performances of those repertoires enabled a generation of Anishinaabe people to sustain the assault of assimilation and carry forward vital body knowledge with which a subsequent generation could fashion a renaissance of tradition” (McNally 107). Referring to

interviews conducted with elders who either watched or participated in the Garden River performances, Margot Francis relates how the “style and language of the performance facilitated layers of meaning other than those included in Longfellow’s original text . . . [which] would *only* have been available to other Ojibwe speakers in the audience” (138; emphasis original). For example,

Betty Grawberger, whose uncle, John Erskine Pine, performed as Hiawatha in the 1930s, spoke of the importance of ritual dance in the pageant. One of her central recollections involved the use of revered objects like Chief Shingwaukonse’s war club. . . . “That was really quite meaningful to the people . . . they all waited for that scene.” (Francis 134)

Similarly, in the 1901 performance, “Rebecca Kabaosa, who played the part of Minnehaha, wore many richly worked garments, including a two-hundred-year old wampum, a valuable heirloom of the community” (134).

The Garden River cast thus engaged in a “double coding of the cultural traditions presented onstage,” using *Hiawatha* as “a vehicle for preserving and presenting Anishinaabek cultural heritage” while “ensur[ing] that the community gained some benefit from an empowered author who had employed its cultural traditions to craft his narrative” (Francis 134). Garden River communities members continued to perform the play—a source of pride as well as income—throughout the 1920s and the 1930s at “historic festivals in Sault Ste. Marie,” at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, and as late as 1965 (McNally 119). The play also offered at least one opportunity to directly confront settler audiences about violations of agreements with the Crown. During or perhaps after one of the earliest performances, attended by Longfellow’s daughter, a “little episode” occurred which, according to H. B. Cotterill (an early twentieth century editor of Longfellow’s work who corresponded with the poet’s daughter), “may give some readers pause, if but for a moment”: “An old Ojibway showed the palefaced guests a medal given to his ancestors by one of our Kings, ‘as a pledge that their rights should be respected,’ and with

the promise that as long as the sun shone the Indians should be happy. ‘I see the sun shining,’ said the old man sadly—‘but I do not think the Indians always happy’” (Cotterill 150).

Cotterill seems unable to register this moment as an important public expression of the Crown’s failure to uphold binding legal agreements with Indigenous nations, though he may have been correct that the intervention would be met with only a moment’s pause by most settler audiences. Nonetheless, the incident gives a sense of the way early twentieth century Anishinaabe communities negotiated the publicity and attention that resulted from the performances. Today, the text continues to be recognized by the descendents of the original actors; recently, the Batchewana and Garden River First Nations have been engaged in a research and performance project to “re-interpret[t] Henry Longfellow’s poem ‘The Song of Hiawatha’ from a contemporary Anishinaabe perspective. . . . The project also resulted in a new initiative — a re-enactment of the negotiating and signing of the Robinson-Huron Treaty of the 1860s” (“Garden River”). Such reworkings of the play can be understood as “repatriations” of cultural heritage, used to “develo[p] youth knowledge of Anishinaabe history and mythology” and to “assis[t] youth in re-interpreting the history of Anishinaabe/European contact and re-representing that legacy” (“Garden River”). Considered from an Anishinaabe perspective, and in the context of the Treaty signed in the same decade that Longfellow wrote *Hiawatha*, the play affords an important opportunity to reflect on historical events and transmit cultural knowledge to youth in the community.

In conclusion, I want to turn to one very recent rendering of *Hiawatha*, *Of Hereafter Song*,⁶ poet Liz Howard’s critical-creative intervention into Longfellow’s poem. Howard’s work highlights the interconnections between various processes of colonial “assimilation,” including cultural appropriation, resource extraction, and Longfellow’s poetics. The term “assimilation,” as it unfolds in *Of Hereafter Song*, gestures not only to Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, which Howard describes as “an attempt to assimilate indigenous, specifically Ojibway, oral tradition into Western textual, metric verse,” but also to colonial policy, including the residential schools, and to the effects of resource extraction and industrial

development on the human and non-human life-forms of Northern Ontario (Howard, *Hereafter* 35).

Howard highlights and works against the colonial origins of *Hiawatha*; in the course of a formal unstructuring of its lines, she turns it to a new use. Howard describes her composition process as an “unwriting” of Longfellow’s poem (*Hereafter* 35). This “unwriting” resonates with Sherene Razack’s description of the process of “unmapping”—a methodological approach that attempts to “denaturalize . . . spaces and bodies” in order to “uncover the hierarchies that are protected and the violence that is hidden when we believe [colonial] spatial relations and subjects to be naturally occurring” (Razack 128). Howard’s unwriting is an unmapping of colonial wilderness, which points to the assimilative geographies and narratives created in the process of settler colonialism. In a prose piece attached to an excerpt of *Of Hereafter Song* that appeared in *The Capilano Review*, Howard briefly describes the process through which she unwrites *Hiawatha*. She first guts the “original” text using “an overarching process of random sampling” to extract a series of words and phrases from the epic (*Hereafter* 35). Next she applies a series of procedures drawn from avant-garde poetics, including “homolinguistic translation”—a method in which words are “translated” not into another language but into other words from the same language, a transposition based on sound rather than sense. She also employs “intertextual recombination,” in which vocabularies and texts from various sources are remixed (*Hereafter* 35).

In referring to her use of Longfellow’s work as a “misappropriation” (*Hereafter* 35), Howard plays on the word’s usual sense of appropriating something “for a wrong use; *spec.* the action or an instance of taking (funds, etc.) fraudulently or unfairly” (“Misappropriation, n.”). Howard’s description of her “wrong use” of Longfellow’s text as fraudulent or unfair is, obviously, ironic in light of the profits generated, for Longfellow and others, in the processes through which *Hiawatha* and the Great Lakes country have been mutually constituted by settlers. Yet this characterization also reflects, perhaps, an uneasiness about her own project: while Howard describes Longfellow’s text as an “attempt at assimilation,” in the next breath she describes herself (again, with

heavy irony), as “the ideal end-product of assimilative programs such as the residential school system” in which her own great-grandfather was “interned” (*Hereafter* 35). She further references her own work as a cognition researcher—a scientist “employing empiricism . . . the so-called paramount of Western inquiry into the natural” (*Hereafter* 35)—in a passage that traces a thread from the assimilation of oral literature into Western poetic metre, to the attempted assimilation of Indigenous children in residential schools, to the acts of assimilation implicated in Western scientific knowledge production.

This passage also speaks to Howard’s complicated sense of her project as implicated in the very structures it works to undo. While she constructs her own writing position as radically distant from and opposed to Longfellow’s, she suggests that she is also in some way stuck alongside him—she writes, “there was something similar, suspicious, neighbourly between Longfellow’s situation and my own.” Howard’s misappropriation does not claim to undo any harms, to recover any plenitude. As “a being at odds with itself,” Howard writes *Hereafter* as a wading through and steeping in the “trauma and silence” surrounding her own “government-imposed identity as a non-status aboriginal person.” Not silent—but wondering, “[H]ow could I even write about this?” (*Hereafter* 35).

Howard’s unmapping ultimately targets the inscriptions performed by Longfellow’s poetics and highlights the toxic effects of settler colonialism: “In the towns I wear a sash monogrammed ‘Jacque Cartier’ / and paddle through the desiccation of mute origin” (Howard, *Skullambient* 4). “Thus semi-disguised as the classic colonial explorer,” as I note elsewhere, “Howard’s I strikes out across land ‘black from the mine’ and wades through ‘currents / of embryos where his horse fell into a shattered femur’” (Stewart, “Skullambient by Liz Howard”). “Rather than surfacing in [the] ‘clear and sunny water’” of Longfellow’s Gitche Gumeé, this I describes the environmental devastation caused by the settler “assimilation” of natural resources: in *Skullambient*, “jackpines, herons, and birch are ‘assimilated’ into factories, mines, and railroads in Chapeau and Sudbury” (Stewart, “Skullambient by Liz Howard”).

Howard culls brief sections of text from *Hiawatha* but, extracted from Longfellow’s sing-songy rhythm (which he borrowed from the Northern

European epic the *Kalevala*) and remixed with other words and phrases, they nearly cease to register as parts of the original poem:

the women of bitumen looked over tailing ponds
like a cloud-rack of a tempest
rushed the pale canoes of wings and thunder
to kill the wilderness in the child (Howard, *Hereafter* 35)

Howard turns to free verse, in contrast to the metre used by Longfellow, which is generally described as trochaic tetrameter (each line has four metric feet, four trochees in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed one). Longfellow was very pleased with himself for hitting upon a metre that he felt was uniquely appropriate to his “Indian Edda”; he referred to the “measure” he had chosen as “the right and only one for such a theme,” presumably because there was something “Indian” to him about its sound (Osborn 7).

In a discussion of “the ways non-Indians [have] c[o]me to [f]rame their understandings of Indians,” Deloria asks his readers to “conside[r] the musical origins of the sound that calls out to us ‘Indians!’ [:] DUM dum dum dum, DUM dum dum dum” (Deloria, *Indians* 7). The “drumbeat” cited by Deloria is not the measure that is usually identified in *Hiawatha*; while Deloria’s “DUM dum dum dum” could be described as a trochee followed by a pyrrhic foot, trochaic tetrameter would be written, using Deloria’s method, DUM dum DUM dum DUM dum DUM dum (“**By the shores of Gitche Gumee / By the shining big sea water.**”) However, Deloria’s point recalls the ways in which settler ideas about “Indianness” are reproduced not only visually and textually, but also aurally.

Just as she departs from his “Indian” measure, Howard’s use of language reflects a kind of splitting apart of Longfellow’s vocabulary: “into the affirmative action embryonic mortality / of the loon summit robin gazed / into the bigger than the big-sea-water” (*Hereafter* 35). Words from Longfellow’s text, key to his depiction of the wilderness of the “noble savage”—loon, robin, heron, arrowy, big-sea-water—are confronted with language drawn from the assimilative frameworks that have been applied by settlers to and on the landscapes of the “new world”:

Longfellow's robins, herons, and loons jostle with "archaic," "physiognomy," "jurisdiction," "reconciliation," and "affirmative action." Writing perhaps *from* the Hereafter into which Hiawatha is supposed to have disappeared, Howard reveals the "assimilated" new world to be a dystopian landscape, marked by the deaths of animals and humans, and the pollution caused by resource extraction—caribou eat contaminated lichens, the bear of the Canadian north has become roadkill, coyote lurks at truckstops (Howard, *Skullambient* 20–22). This is not a hopeful scene, but there is hope in her critique of it: in throwing assimilative processes into stark relief, Howard works to stymie, if only in a small way, their "success." Howard's work, like the Batchewana and Garden River First Nations' use of Longfellow's epic, engages with *Hiawatha* in the process of considering and working against colonialism.

As Indigenous scholars and writers insist, decolonization involves the end of cultural appropriation and the restitution of lands and resources to Indigenous peoples—it must go beyond discussions of "reconciliation" (Alfred, "Restitution"). Scholarship that would contribute to these processes ought to work to "strengthen the intellectual sovereignty of individual nations" (Reder 11). While scholars are differently positioned when it comes to producing research that focuses on "the contributions and potentials of Indigenous worldviews" (232), decolonial interventions into the study of Indigenous literature—and Canadian literature and culture more generally—nonetheless have important and wide-ranging implications for those who work in these fields of study. In seeking to respond to these conversations, this article has considered Longfellow's *Hiawatha* in light of the ways in which historical (and contemporary) theft of lands and resources has been inextricably tied to settler culture, and has highlighted contemporary anti-colonial work that makes use of Longfellow's text.

Notes

- 1 While I do not spend much time on it here, I write at greater length about Longfellow's conflation of different Indigenous nations, narratives, and figures in the second chapter of my dissertation, "Naturalizing Canada: Settler Colonial 'Wilderness' and the Making of Race and Place." For a discussion of the histori-

cal relationships between the Anishinaabek and the Haudenosaunee, see Simpson's article "Looking after Gdoo-naaganinaa: Precolonial Nishnaabeg Diplomatic and Treaty Relationships." (There are different spellings and transcriptions of many Indigenous words and names in English: further, "Anishinaabe" may be used as an adjective or in the singular, whereas Anishinaabek, Anishinaabeg, or Nishnaabeg may indicate the plural, and/or the people as a whole.)

- 2 For relevant sources see Justice's "'Go away, water!,'" Weaver, Womack, and Warrior's *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, Reder's "*Ácimisowin* as Theoretical Practice," and Justice, Martin, McKegney, Reder, and Sinclair's "Canadian Indigenous Literary Nationalism?" This last source also includes a discussion of potential limitations of the Indigenous literary nationalist approach.
- 3 This discussion may call to mind, for scholars of Canadian literature and literary criticism, what Bentley has characterized as Frye's "sweeping and largely groundless assertion" that the garrison mentality, a "deep terror in regard to nature," pervades "Canadian poetry" and literature (n. p.). For a discussion of changing attitudes to wilderness, see Cronon's "The Trouble With Wilderness."
- 4 See also Bergland's work on "Indian" ghosts in American literature: "the ghosting of Indians is a technique of removal. By writing about Indians as ghosts, white writers effectively remove them from American lands, and place them, instead, within the [North] American imagination" (Bergland 1).
- 5 I am grateful to Karl Hele for making inquiries as to possible translations for this name. There are a variety of possibilities, but it seems likely that the word was Armstrong's invention. I also wish to thank Hele for making available to me early film versions of the play, as well as a review of the performance in *Canadian Magazine*.
- 6 Sections of *Of Hereafter Song* have appeared in *The Capilano Review*, online at *ditch*, *poetry*, and in the form of a 2011 chapbook published by Ferno House Press, entitled *Skullambient*. Although these publications have different titles, and may not be explicitly identified as part of *Of Hereafter Song* in each case, they represent different sections and versions of the ongoing project. (Personal communication with Howard, July 30, 2012.)

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